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# GOOD TEACHING FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE INSTRUCTOR

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Address delivered at the last Annual Meeting of the Association of Virginia Colleges held in Roanoke Hotel, Roanoke, Virginia, February 9-10, 1934.

Ladies and Gentlemen:—

First of all, I should like to present my sincere apologies to you for assuming the boldness of addressing this group of expert teachers instead of President Glass of Sweet Briar College, who deeply regrets not being able to be with you today. Her wide experience as a teacher and college executive would have made her contribution to our topic particularly valuable. I can assure you that my own reflections on what constitutes good teaching, from the point of view of the instructor, are presented in a very humble spirit with the hope that they may serve as a starting-point for further discussion.

My own experience as an instructor is practically limited to the Eastern women's colleges and, as I have never been an undergraduate in this country, it is probably more difficult for me than for others to get the student's point of view and to arrive at a tolerably clear understanding of the special aims of the liberal arts college, in many ways so different from those prevailing at a continental university in Europe. One of your well-known teachers is of the opinion that "to give its students an intellectual grasp on human experience" is the chief function of the liberal college.<sup>1</sup> How such an end may be achieved is indicated in *The Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors*, which devotes a whole issue (May, 1933) to a most thought-provoking study of college and university teaching. In it the following statement is found, to which I fully agree: "The purpose of college teaching is to induce self-propelled intellectual activity on the part of the student. Accord-

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<sup>1</sup>Meiklejohn, A., *The Liberal College*, Boston, 1920, p. 38.

ingly a frank recognition of this principle of self-education under guidance will suggest a sufficient definition of good teaching. To teach effectively is to lead, to inspire and to guide the learner. Any technique or device that serves these ends is a good device.”<sup>2</sup>

The last sentence in the quotation seems to me important, because it leaves the instructor a free hand to employ whatever method is best adapted to the teaching of his field. Thus the laboratory method, supplemented by lectures, is everywhere recognized as being well suited to the teaching of the physical sciences and is steadily gaining ground in the teaching of psychology. That another highly different technique, including many class recitations and very frequent written tests, is necessary for the teaching of certain tool subjects, such as mathematics and first-year language courses, is very obvious. Lengthy and ardent debates as to the relative merits of the lecture method and the class discussion method have been raging for some years now, but until more extensive controlled tests have been made it is hardly possible to arrive at a fair conclusion. The tests undertaken at Iowa State University in 1925 seem to indicate that “the lecture method is more suitable for the immediate recall of subject matter than for its retention to a later period, while the reverse is true of the class discussion method.”<sup>3</sup> I am inclined to think that most competent teachers avail themselves of both methods, as different kinds of material within the same course often call for different ways of presentation. The psychological effect on a class where both methods are used is important, as it is frequently easier to arouse a student’s interest when there is no absolute certainty about what to expect in a classroom period. Where a large amount of factual material has to be covered in a relatively short time, the lecture method seems to be the most advantageous, for it takes unusually great skill to guide a class discussion in such a way that all important points are made clear and no time wasted on irrelevant material. But wherever the course material is of a controversial nature, such that a number of diverging solutions may legitimately be proposed, the class discussion method appears to be superior to the lecture, provided

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<sup>2</sup>*Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors*, vol. XIX, number 5, section 2, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup>Reported in *School and Society*, March 21, 1925.

that assignments have been carefully made with that method in view. Whichever method of presentation he uses, an instructor should have a broad and accurate knowledge of the subject matter in his course; he must know how to sift and select the material, so that the proper emphasis and perspective are given and the sequence of topics is natural and clear to the students; he also should attempt to correlate the material with that of related fields and, wherever possible, draw analogies and examples from current life in order to demonstrate the relation of his special subject to the wider field of modern thoughts and ideas. Although good organization of material is absolutely essential, a word of caution might be spoken about putting it down in too firm and rigid a form. I have experienced again and again that after hours of most careful preparation, when the time for class presentation comes, the material is cold; it somehow fails to arouse the interest of the group and has to be revitalized in order to get across. It is as if often three stages in preparation are necessary: (1) the wide reading as a result of which material is selected; (2) the firm organization of fundamental parts of the material; and (3) further reflection on examples and illustrations to be used, so that the subject is in a more or less flexible state in one's mind and adaptable to the prevailing mood of the class-room. Sometimes, at the spur of the moment, a shift from one teaching method to another is necessary and this leads me to my next point: the contact between instructor and students that should be established in the classroom and without which effective teaching is extremely difficult.

Here the people that are born teachers are at an advantage, in that most of them are extremely sensitive to the mood of the class and almost instinctively adapt their teaching and their own response to it. They are aware of the give and take that is to be found and draw stimulus from the class as well as try to give it. Besides an exposition of ideas an exchange of ideas is taking place, sometimes not without a rather vivid clash of diverging opinions which in most cases is decidedly stimulating. However, this does not happen unless the instructor has a genuine, never failing interest in and enthusiasm for his subject, so that he is eager to convey to his students some of that which he himself values so highly as an enrichment of his own life; but in his

eagerness he should not forget the students' point of view, which is not that of the specialist (in this regard many eager young teachers just out of graduate school are often unknowingly the worst trespassers), nor should he forget that it is his duty to lead and guide his students to a fuller understanding of their own potentialities and of both the immediate and the ultimate significance of the subject in hand. He should attempt to stimulate them to clearer thinking, not to a mere accumulation of facts without much interpretation on their part.

Students nearly always respond to the instructor who expects serious and fairly hard work from them. In answer to a questionnaire about the outstanding characteristics of the best teacher they had had, most of the former Rhodes scholars stressed that "he expected more initiative and allowed more independence to his students than others," that "his courses required more work than the average course" and "that there was more of an inspiration for clean honest living in his teaching."<sup>4</sup> Answers such as these might indicate that teaching should preferably be adapted to the level of the slightly better than average students in the group, and that under no circumstances should the consideration for obviously poor students be allowed to occupy an undue amount of precious class time. If such a student is earnest in his work, much can be achieved by private conferences which should be willingly granted; if he is indifferent and lazy, such an attitude on his part should logically lead to failure in the course, and no instructor should waste much extra time or sympathy on such cases but rather concentrate his efforts on making the really good students go as far as possible for them, once their intellectual curiosity has been aroused. The average good student is annoyed by a course that is too easy and too slow, he despises the lecturer who talks down to him or the instructor who keeps on treating him as an immature child. After one, or sometimes two, years in college most students are ready for more independence and respond more quickly when put on their own with the tacit understanding that of course they are fairly intelligent grown-ups, capable of managing their own time and their own affairs. Accordingly, there is in many institutions a definite change of teaching method between courses of the first

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<sup>4</sup>Reported in *School and Society*, March, 1925.

two years and those of the junior and senior years, when a certain concentration of studies begins with the student's choice of a field of major interest.

It is at this point that the superior student, whose intellectual interest has already been aroused and whose capacity for work of a high grade has been tested, deserves special attention. "He needs a chance to assume responsibility, to have the facilities of the college, including its instructional staff, at his disposal to aid him in studying what he really desires to study. For him to assume the attitude of a searcher for truth rather than to be in college to do what he is told to do, seems to be the essence of the needed change. Every student who can profit by this point of view in his work should be given a chance to be rather extreme, but it points in the right direction. It is to guide such students that in many institutions the tutorial method and the seminar method of teaching are being tried out, in an attempt to release them from irksome routine, to allow them to go ahead in their studies at their own faster pace and to make it possible for them to obtain a wider, better integrated understanding of their chosen fields, such achievement to be tested by a comprehensive examination at the end of the two-year period. Most of us who have had the privilege of guiding such work are impressed with the difficulties and the time involved; the finding of such time and the money needed for this type instruction is the problem of the college executive; I shall only stress here that the strain involved in guiding a small group tutorially is fully equal to that of teaching a large college class; it should be recognized as such and not considered an additional duty of the already busy teacher who ought to be relieved of some of his regular class work instead. This makes the procedure a costly one for the college, but there is no doubt that the enrichment and the intellectual stimulus gained by the use of such methods by both the students and the instructors concerned and the final results obtained justify further experimentation along such lines.

"This brings me to the important point about the place that research or other creative work should occupy in the instructor's life. It seems to me to be absolutely essential for his best professional development that a reasonable amount of time be given

to such pursuits. He is such a student.”<sup>5</sup> This statement of Professor Kelly’s is perhaps expected to keep up to date in the literature of his subject and should find a certain revitalization in tackling some of the unsolved problems connected with it. It should permeate and invigorate all his teaching and keep him from getting mentally stiff and inflexible. However, practically no kind of research can be accomplished by snatching an odd hour for it now and then, it takes consecutive time, uninterrupted by conferences and committee work, and the planning of his teaching schedule should allow for such work, as in most cases it is conducive to better teaching. Another difficulty with regard to research that the instructor in a small college has to face is the lack of adequate library facilities which often necessitates lengthy journeys to greater centres to check up on material.

Some executives have put too great stress on the importance of research among their faculty members and the rewards given for successful research. Such work should be kept in its proper place and should never be allowed to absorb the greater part of the instructor’s interest. He is above all a teacher, but a teacher who for the sake of his own intellectual integrity, which after all is his most valuable possession, should assist in widening, be it ever so little, the boundaries of learning and in correlating and interpreting already existing knowledge. In his teaching and in his private life he remains an example—deterrent or otherwise—to his students of “learning at the helm of life.” As Alexander Meiklejohn has well expressed it, “Learning is criticism, and criticism, what is that? . . . It is the finding of principles that run through many separate things and bind them together, making them one. Learning interprets; it takes the fragments of our life, our knowledge, and makes of them a unity, a whole. Each bit by itself, is clear but meaningless. Learning interprets them, gives them significance, makes out of them a scheme of life, a system of knowledge which one can understand and use.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Kelly, F. J., *The American Arts College*, New York, 1925, p. 110.

<sup>6</sup>Meiklejohn, A., *op. cit.*, p. 74.



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